DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 286 CE 052 565

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TITLE The Dropout and Vocational Decidedness: Can It Make a Difference?
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Persistence; *Career Choice; *Dropout Prevention; *Dropout Programs; Dropouts; Education Work Relationship; *High Risk Students; High Schools; Occupational Aspiration; *School Holding Power; Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

Vocational education has a significant role to play in dropout prevention because studies show a positive correlation between involvement in vocational education and school completion. Students involved in vocational education are more likely to be involved in school-sponsored activities that help them shape goals for themselves and the future. At-risk students (potential dropouts) should be especially targeted for vocational education programs that can prepare them for a decent future. A federally sponsored research report lists these six strategies for dealing with dropouts: intervene early, create a positive school climate, set high expectations, select and develop strong teachers, provide a broad range of instructional programs, and initiate collaborative efforts. A national survey shows that vocational classrooms provide more educational experiences similar to dropout prevention programs than do academic classrooms. Vocational classrooms are more student-centered, more activity-based, and more individualized than other classrooms. (CML)

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THE DROPOUT AND VOCATIONAL DECIDEDNESS: CAN IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The United States, for the last 20 years, has been on a gradual decline of standardized test scores of students in both the elementary and secondary school system. Just recently, the American Broadcasting Company aired a television special to probe the problems facing the educational system today. The program was titled "Why Kids Flunk?" and offered information which, though it did not provide any real solution to our country's educational dilemma, did offer serious food for thought.

There seems to be nationwide agreement that the average student today is failing because of a lack of values, little regard for discipline, and a lack of goals. Obviously, students lack the motivation to learn and consequently fail academically. The decision to drop out of high school becomes an easy choice to make when an individual lacks motivation, has no real direction, goal, or focus in his/her life.

In the last several years, school dropouts have become not only a serious educational problem, but also a major national concern. "In 1985-86, nearly 4,000 teenagers dropped out of school every school day. In many urban areas, half the students drop out before graduating."[1]

In an article written by Edward Kennedy, titled "When Students Drop Out, We All Lose," the available research indicates that "...dropouts will, relative to those who complete high school, earn less money, suffer more unemployment, have more health problems, and be more dissatisfied with their personal lives."[2]

In the October 5th issue of Education Week, a study commission of the Council of Chief State School Officers made recommendations which exhort all states to give special attention to children who are considered at risk of school failure. They urge "a continuum of services" beginning from birth to age 8, including parent education, child care, developmentally appropriate education, health and social services.[3]

There seems to be a parallel between what the available research tells us about dropouts and what the Council of Chief State School Officers is trying to emphasize as essential if the at-risk student or the potential dropout is to have a chance. Since the student dropout rate appears to be greatest in the large urban areas, and since the lower socio-economic and socially disadvantaged student is targeted as "at risk", then the most sensible (as well as humanistic) approach is to offer services that will address basic needs as early as possible.

If this Commission's proposals would be adopted, it could have far-reaching effects in communities across the country, as well as on state finances. But it would be a significant step forward in trying to assure school success for students who are at risk.

Yet, what must we do about the potential dropout in secondary schools? This student cannot reap the possible benefits from new programs addressing basic needs and early childhood services. Is the potential high school dropout programmed for failure?

"A growing body of research suggests that the dropout problem can be reduced through improved educational programming, and that vocational education has a role to play in such efforts."[4] Studies have been done showing a positive correlation between students who have been involved in vocational education and consequently remain in school. These students are more likely to be actively involved in school-sponsored activities which help them shape goals for themselves and their futures.

In the September, 1988 Vocational Education Journal, Jim Schmidt, a counselor educator, believes that a comprehensive K-12 guidance curriculum would be beneficial to all students, especially those who may consider dropping out.

The Idaho Department of Education's Division of Vocational Education developed a model program which tried to keep at-risk students in school by meeting their needs. The program focus included:

- early identification and intervention
- sequencing developmental appropriateness
- education of parents
- integrating the vocational education program as part of the total educational program
- acquiring competency based skills in areas of social and academic growth, and career awareness.[5]

There are other model programs which are attempting to reduce the dropout rate. In the program launched by the Idaho Department of Education's Division of Vocational Education, and in Philadelphia, Cincinnati and Baltimore, vocational education programs are an important strategy in reducing the dropout rate. All of these programs have similar characteristics which demonstrate "what works" with at-risk students: early intervention, a healthy school climate, progress in developing a positive self-image, and effective teachers.

It is clear that vocational education has a significant role to play in dropout prevention. The 1987 report by the Hudson Institute entitled, "Work Force 2000: Work and Workers for the Twenty-First Century" projects labor trends that will probably occur in the United States between now and the 21st Century. "This report suggests that the work force is growing older, approaching an average age of 39 by the year 2000, as compared to 35 at the present time. ...These trends present some extraordinary challenges. If our nation is to continue to prosper, we must find ways to maintain the dynamics of an aging work force. We must also find ways to completely integrate the populations with special training needs into the mainstream. The stark reality is that unless we fully utilize our special populations between now and the year 2000, we simply may not have the entry-level work force needed to maintain a healthy economy."[6]

The Work Force 2000 Report indicates that most jobs in the United States will require a college level or post-secondary education; the skills level jobs will be greatly reduced in the future.

Obviously, the vocational education programs of today must meet the challenges of the 21st Century. Today's students must be given the opportunities to provide for their future in a work world that is quickly changing.

Bonnie Guiton, Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education at the United States Department of Education, says, "We must deliver an educational experience that will equip vocational education students with a high level of marketplace adaptability."[7] Today's vocational education curriculum in the high school must reflect the changing needs of the workplace. Ms. Guiton suggests that schools and the private sector form partnerships so that there is a continuous dialogue between business and vocational educators.

One such partnership, the American Express Company's Passport to Employment Project, recently received a citation from the President's Private Sector Initiative Program. This model program trains at-risk students for entry level jobs in the business world in large urban areas across the country.

Emerging from the Passport Atlanta Georgia project is a new curriculum in English, Math, and Social Studies which was designed as a result of trying to prepare inner-city seniors to choose a career in banking or a service industry. This curriculum reflects the changing needs of the workplace.

If potential dropouts or students at risk have any chance to change, have any hope to survive the statistical fallout found in large urban settings, then strong career and vocational programs which offer "marketplace adaptability" must be part of the solution to this educational dilemma.

"Programs with this characteristic not only adjust to the economic environment in which they are located, but also incorporate a set of fundamental

basic skills that allows students to move successfully beyond their first jobs. These skills exceed the ability to read, write and compute; they include the capacity to communicate, make decisions, solve problems, analyze and evaluate tasks and situations, and, MOST importantly, to learn."[8] A vocational education curriculum that provides skills that will equip students with the flexibility to change and adapt to a technical world and workplace is an essential element and key ingredient in any educational recipe for success.

Students need options. Vocational education offers more opportunities for students. They can learn (in addition to acquiring basic skills and strengthening them) different ways to pursue their own interests. They can begin to value the importance of education for employment--for their future. "It allows them to witness first-hand the relationship between learning and working."[9]

James Weber, a senior research specialist at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, states in his article, "The Relevance of Vocational Education to Dropout Prevention," that a federal report titled, "Dealing with Dropouts: The Urban Superintendent's call to Action," sets forth six strategies for schools today: "intervene early, create a positive school climate, set high expectations, select and develop strong teachers, provide a broad range of instructional programs, and initiate collaborative efforts." [10] Weber cites a recent study of nine vocational educational programs which hold students in school until they are prepared to function as adults.

All of the programs had several common characteristics: programs were held in "non-traditional" school environments and had lower teacher to pupil ratios; there was a tendency to focus on 9th and 10th graders and to give attention to the "whole student." Strategies included combining the basic skills, parental involvement, providing work experience or job placement, counseling, supportive services, and training in vocational skills. Hence, general

organizations in these areas was a common feature for all nine programs.

Another common characteristic was staffing and flexibility. Staff members had to create a student-teacher relationship that was more demanding than usual, since they had to stay on top of students' needs. Teachers had to be committed to the programs' philosophy and goals.

Instruction was also a common feature. "Programs spent half of the time on remediation in the basic skills area, one-fourth of the time on meeting students' personal needs. Individualized instruction was given to help student motivation and to build esprit de corps."[11]

One of the questions which surfaced as a result of comparing the dropout programs' more non-traditional vocational approach was "To what degree does the typical high school classroom support the educational and developmental needs of at-risk students?"[12]

To answer this question, a national survey was conducted titled, "The Dynamics of Secondary Classrooms." The appendix shows an analysis of the data received from the survey. One clear result of the data is that vocational education classrooms have more educational experiences provided for at-risk students which have some similarities to dropout prevention programs. Other results which compare the vocational and non-vocational classroom instructional approaches are dramatic. "The differences observed in vocational and non-vocational classrooms lends weight to the claim that vocational classrooms are more student-centered, more activity-based, and more individualized than other classrooms--three characteristics deemed important when dealing with at-risk youth."[13]

It is interesting to consider an early practitioner in career development, Frank Parsons. Mr. Parsons, in the early 1900's, focused on questions of social reform and the general welfare of citizens and how these issues related

to a theory of Occupational Choice. Almost 80 years after Mr. Parsons' career development theories were written, we are still struggling to answer the same questions! It seems that there are many theorists of Career Development and Occupational Guidance who might disagree with such pragmatic questions raised by Parsons--but I do not think that the 1918 report written by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (Department of Interior) is that far removed from the purpose or intent of vocational education or decidedness in 1988. The report stated that, "Vocational Guidance, properly conceived, organizes schoolwork so that the pupil may be helped to discover his own capacities, aptitu des and interests, may himself learn about the character and conditions of occupational life and may himself arrive at an intelligent vocational decision."[14] The Commission's report was obviously influenced by Frank Parsons' pragmatism.

In the last 20 years, theorists in occupational guidance and career development have not made career guidance and development in adolescence a major issue. Piaget, for example, stated in 1967: "True adaptation to society comes automatically when the adolescent reformer attempts to put his ideas to work. Just as experience reconciles formal thought with the reality of things, so does effective and enduring work, undertaken in concrete and well-defined situations, cure dreams."[15] At the risk of sounding naive and idealistic, it is the youthful dream that can convert the hope for the workplace of the future into the reality of success.

Another important factor contributing to the importance of vocational decidedness in adolescence is the nation's present economy. The early 1980's saw a severe recession, and consequently created an environment that shifted from inflationary to disinflationary. This type of economic change points to the importance of adolescents giving serious consideration to their

occupational future.

The at-risk student or potential student dropout should especially be targeted for vocational education programs that can prepare them for a decent future. Some of these dropout prevention programs have been discussed. It is clear that vocational education programs offer a viable alternative to the traditional academic setting.

The future of our country is in the youth of our country. We cannot continue to allow the statistics on the high school dropout problem to continue to climb. In "The Courage To Change, New Directions For Career Education," the editors present a case for career education based on many of the factors previously mentioned. Richard Hofsteadter stated: "Young people don't have anything that they want to do. Our culture hasn't been able to perpetuate from one generation to the next, as it used to, the desire to do this or that or the other thing, and I think this is one of the roots of the dissatisfaction... there is a decided crisis in the sense of vocation among young people which is a very strong desire to do something in particular and do it well...a desire to perform well, the feeling of craftsmanship..."[16]

It is essential that national and educational resources be harnessed in order to deal an effective blow against the problem of high school dropouts.

Eli Ginzberg, in his book, Understanding Human Resources, discusses the importance of the national government developing policies and being completely committed to helping the disadvantaged youth who are considered to be most at risk. "Federal resources should be targeted on youth most in need. While there is no simple way to identify this group, those youth most at risk come from low-income families, are members of minority groups, or live in areas with high concentrations of low-income families."[17]

The October issue of News Leader, The National Association of Secondary School Principals' publication, printed an article titled, "Teens Worry About The American Dream." The article discusses the results of a survey conducted by the American Home Economics Association. Of 32 issues listed, 3 in 10 teens say they are concerned about "making the wrong decisions about their future and not being able to change them (34%); 3 out of 4 teens expect to attend college, and 94% believe that having a job they enjoy will be an important part of their lives. Teens believe also that schools are least effective in teaching life skills."[18]

The survey results reflect the need for schools to prepare students to make their own unique contribution to tomorrow's world. "Schools must liberate rather than contain human potential, fortifying the young with hard skills and intellectual powers for their adult roles in society."[19]

Perhaps this is an impossible dream, but one which demands, nonetheless, extraordinary vision and effort on the part of responsible leadership in both education and government.

Table 1

Vocational and Non-vocational Classrooms Compared to Model Dropout Prevention Programs

Model dropout prevention program characteristics	Vocational versus non-vocational classrooms
Teachers have authority to design courses and experiences	Vocational teachers feel they have more authority and control
Low teacher/pupil ratio	Vocational classes have significantly lower teacher/pupil ratios
Teachers willing and able to "stay on top" of students' needs	Vocational teachers spend more time counseling students on a personal basis, but less time working with other staff to resolve students' problems
Emphasis on basic skills remediation	Vocational teachers spend less time on basic skills reinforcement and enhancement
Emphasis on resolving students' personal problems	Vocational teachers place significantly less emphasis on personal growth and development as a teaching goal
Environment free from absenteeism, theft, substance abuse	Vocational teachers perceive fewer such problems
Individualization	Vocational classes are significantly more likely to be individualized
Active role for students	Vocational class activities engage students more actively
Provide recognition and special awards	Students are recognized for their performance more often in vocational classes

Source: Analysis of data from the *Dynamics of Secondary Classrooms* database.

Table 2

Vocational and Non-vocational Classrooms Instructional Approaches, 1987

Non-vocational classrooms	Percentage of Time	Vocational classrooms	Percentage of Time
Teacher is the formal leader of instruction	60	Teacher leads instruction	40
		Students lead instruction	40
Presentation of factual or conceptual information	35	Presentation or acquisition of factual/procedural information	20
Teacher guides practice-related activities or provides explanations	25	Teacher participates in practice to develop psychomotor skills	48
Teacher works with total class or a large group	72	Students work individually	41
		Students work in small groups	25
Teacher-to-student interactions	61	Teacher-to-student interactions	40
		Student-to-student interactions	22
Activities:		Activities:	
Discussions	29	Practice of psychomotor skills	51
Lectures	24	Discussions	14
Written work	22	Lectures	14
Reading	14	Written work	11
Taking tests	12	Reading	8
Materials used:		Materials used:	
Textbooks	32	Machines, tools	50
Worksheets	32	Worksheets	25
Chalkboard	17	Other	19
Tests	12	Textbooks	15
Audiovisuals	11	Chalkboard	7

Source: *The Dynamics of Secondary Classrooms.*

FOOTNOTES

1. Vocational Education Journal, p. 34, Edward Kennedy, September, 1988.
2. Ibid., p. 34.
3. Education Week, p. 1, Deborah Gold, October 5, 1988.
4. Vocational Education Journal, p. 36, James M. Weber, September, 1988.
5. Vocational Education Journal, p. 48, Jim Schmidt, September, 1988.
6. Vocational Education Journal, p. 20, Bonnie Guiton, September, 1988.
7. Ibid., p. 21.
8. Ibid., p. 21.
9. Vocational Education Journal, p. 35, Edward Kennedy, September, 1988.
10. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, (Urban Superintendents Newwork), U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Government Printing Office, (#195-625-814/70433), 1987.
11. Vocational Education Journal, p. 36, James M. Weber, September, 1988.
12. Ibid., p. 38.
13. Ibid., p. 38.
14. Vocational Guidance Quarterly, p. 243, W. P. Gothard, 1985.
15. Vocational Guidance Quarterly, p. 247, Fred Vondrack and John Schulenberg, June, 1986.
16. The Courage To Change, New Directions for Career Education, p. 10, editors Pucinski and Hirsch, 1971.
17. Understanding Human Resources, p. 656, Eli Ginzberg, 1985.
18. News Leader, p. 2, National Association of Secondary School Principals, October, 1988.
19. The Courage To Change, New Directions for Career Education, p. 11, editors Pucinski and Hirsch, 1971.

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